

"I think it creates further estrangement," said Representative Bill Delahunt, a Massachusetts Democrat and a member of the House International Relations Committee who has met many times with Mr. Chávez. "One cannot get around the fact that Hugo Chávez is a democratically elected president."

But Bush administration policy planners say that efforts to patch up relations with Venezuela have largely failed.

The American ambassador, William Brownfield, who took over in Caracas in September, spent fruitless months before getting a meeting with Mr. Rodríguez. Requests for meetings with other ministers and even midlevel officials are routinely ignored, and Venezuela has canceled dozens of routine exchange programs with the United States.

The one option that administration officials increasingly believe they have is to respond much more assertively and publicly to Venezuelan policies the United States does not like, ideally with the help of other countries and respected institutions like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

"We shouldn't be afraid to say when he's taking away liberties, not at all," Robert B. Zoellick, now the deputy secretary of state, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February.

Venezuelan Foreign Ministry officials say they still hold out hope that relations will improve. "There is one condition for us to have healthy relations with the United States," said Vice Minister Mari Pili Hernández, who handles relations with Washington. "It's called respect."

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MCCAUL of Texas). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BURTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BURTON of Indiana addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to take my special order at this time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

U.S. FOREST SERVICE NEEDS TO ACT NOW

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. ROHRABACHER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Mr. Speaker, a few days ago a P-3 Orion aircraft, owned by Aero-Union, on contract to the U.S. Forest Service, crashed in California. This crash in and of itself reduced the current Federal fleet of nonmilitary, firefighting planes by 10 percent. It probably also will lead to the grounding of the remaining nine Federal aircraft currently available for firefighting in the United States. So here we are, quickly approaching the fire season, and our Federal fleet of civilian firefighting aircraft, which was 33 strong only 2 years ago, will most likely be nonexistent this year.

Yes, we may have a few small crop dusters. We have some helicopters available. But if the wind comes up and a major conflagration gets out of control, our frontline firefighters will have no real backup. This would be a calamity of death and destruction, made all the worse because it is avoidable if we act now.

To have us become so defenseless is inexcusable. Not to take the steps immediately to end this vulnerability would be even worse. So what do we do?

Today I am calling on the leadership of the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take the steps necessary to prevent a fire catastrophe later this year. Do not leave us helpless and our firefighters vulnerable and unable to thwart a blaze for lack of a large tanker aircraft which should be available. And do not tell me that it cannot be done unless we have billions of dollars. The U.S. Forest Service regulations establishing the requirements for airplane-based firefighting are obviously designed to protect the good old boys and to discourage anyone else with new approaches and new alternatives. I am suggesting that the U.S. Forest Service drop its obstructionist policies that have prevented, among other things, the use of foreign firefighting aircraft to extinguish major fires in the United States.

Specifically, the Russians have invested a large amount of money in large capacity firefighting air tankers. We wanted them to invest in this. We wanted them to invest in these things rather than in military hardware. Well, they invested and they can be anywhere in the United States or yes, anywhere in the world, in less than 24 hours. They have already played a significant role in extinguishing huge fires in Australia, Greece, and elsewhere. Yet the U.S. Forest Service has blocked the Russians from providing their services here, even as we endured massive fire destruction in places like Florida, New Mexico, and in California. This stonewalling and obstructionism has gone on for 10 years, even as our Federal firefighting air fleet deteriorated, and even as lives, homes, and other property were being lost to out-of-control fires.

This year there has been considerably more rainfall in southern California than usual. It does not take a genius to predict that the increased rainfall we have already experienced will result in a proliferation of shrub growth, thereby increasing the danger of wildfires later this year. In short, we face a fearsome wildfire threat, and the U.S. Forest Service needs to act now, or we will have no large capacity firefighting aircraft tankers available should the worst occur. If we contract with the Russians who have large capacity firefighting aircraft ready to go, we will save lives and property, even if we do that as just a stop-gap measure until domestic aircraft is built and can be introduced.

If the U.S. Forest Service does it right and does it right now, takes the steps that are required for these Russian air tankers to assist us in extinguishing a major wildfire and make those steps right now, we can actually save lives and save property. But if they do not take these steps now and we lose property senselessly, they will be held accountable. If disaster strikes and people and animals die and valuable property is destroyed as huge air tankers that could have helped remain grounded and kept out of the fight, then those responsible will be exposed for this incompetence. But that, unfortunately, will not undo the damage or bring back a life that has been lost.

It is time for the Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service to change its attitude, quit trying to protect a good-old-boy network which is unable to function, and to permit others to get into this business, including the Russians, who we would like to have invest in this type of domestic, peaceful technology.

Mr. JERRY T. WILLIAMS,
Director, Fire and Aviation Management, Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. WILLIAMS: Reference your 19 Aug 2004 letter, File Code 5700. My staff examined your response to the questions on the Air Tanker grounding by the Forest Service and the possible role of the Russian IL-76 in fighting US wildfires. Your response has raised some very interesting questions. The recent news release saying that the Forest Service is planning to contract for only 10 air tankers has added urgency to our investigations. With the heavy rains in California this last winter, the additional brush and timber will create an extreme fire hazard here in Southern California. A review of your Aerial Resource Bridge Plan for 2005 indicates that you are only going to contract for a maximum of 20 heavy fire fighting aircraft instead of the 33 air tankers that have been available in the past. Your RFP for heavy tankers has excluded the possibility of the use of foreign aircraft such as the IL-76, the CL-215, and the CL-415 to supplement the limited U.S. resources available due to your grounding of the air tanker fleet. It is not clear that the resources will be available to fight the fires if we have a fire season as bad as we had several years ago.

I am requesting that you prepare a briefing for presentation at my Huntington Beach office to set the stage for discussions between your experts and myself in Washington on the air tanker issues. The primary topic would be the FY 05 fire fighting plans with emphasis on the heavy air tanker fleet. Particular emphasis should be given to discussion of your modernization strategy and the role that newer aircraft will be playing. Information on the civilian C-130 fleet that is not included in your bridge plan should be included. Since the military C-130's appear to play an important role in your fire fighting plans, it is inconsistent that the civilian C-130 fleet capabilities have been excluded in your recent RFP. A detailed explanation of this action is requested.

The points of contact for this presentation are Dr. George Kuck in my Huntington Beach office and Chris Minakowski on my Washington staff. Before presenting me with the briefing in Washington, please have your appropriate staff member travel to Huntington Beach for a pre-briefing to Dr. Kuck